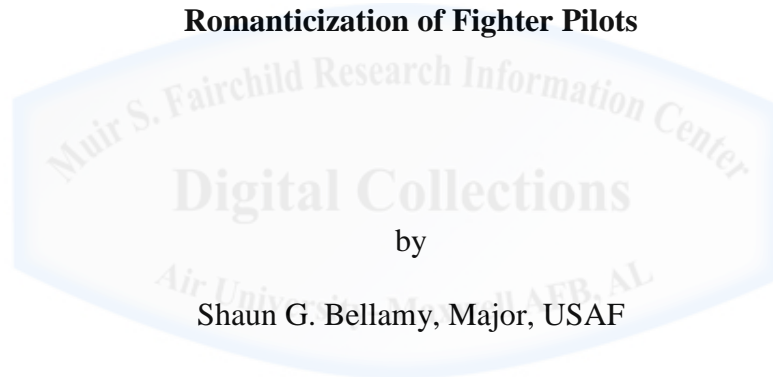AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

From Les Chevaliers du Ciel to Steely-Eyed Killers:

Intersecting Influences of Hollywood and Reality on the

Romanticization of Fighter Pilots

by

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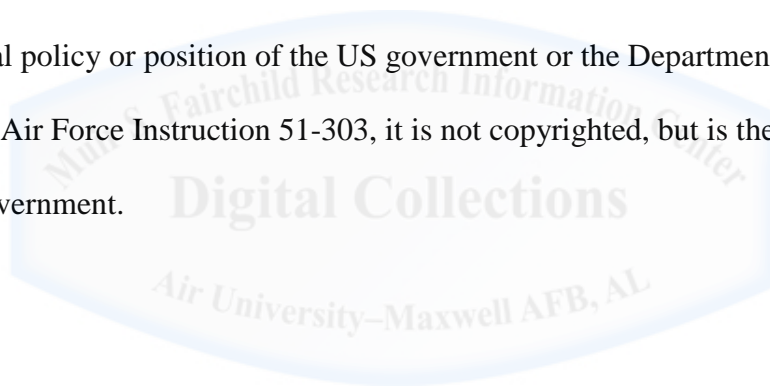
Abstract

      Stories of epic heroes abound throughout human civilization and have served as paragons
of cultural ideals since before recorded history. Based loosely on reality, these mythic figures
are typically drawn from a society's warrior caste whose larger-than-life personas and exploits
are easily transmitted by means of storytelling. This paper will examine how the intersecting
influences of modern storytelling (via motion pictures) and reality have contributed to the rise of
one modern American warrior-hero persona in particular, the fighter pilot. Based upon an
exploration of the subject's treatment across a sampling of films, this analysis will discern the six
fundamental qualities attributed to the archetype as well as examine how the movie industry
leverages traditional hero development methods in order to venerate the fighter pilot as a role
model in the public eye. By comparing these fictional elements against observations of actual
desired qualities, the significance of Hollywood's impact on the recruitment and development of
fighter pilot candidates becomes apparent. Finally, this paper highlights potential implications
associated with the public's mental model of combat aviators that may have considerable
repercussions for future force development.

Contents

Only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation; a hero embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow.

– Norman Mailer

Section 1: The Low Down (Thesis)

Mankind's fascination with heroes has existed throughout time immemorial. Stories of epic endeavors by larger-than-life figures abound and are among the earliest forms of communication captured in writing. Throughout the ages this fascination with deifying the exploits of a select few has been handed down from one civilization to another. Unfailingly, some of the most revered characters inevitably represent paragons of a society's warrior caste: Gilgamesh, Beowulf, Achilles, King Arthur, etc. These heroic combatants are depicted to possess a variety of distinctive attributes that form the basis of their warrior ethos. Eventually, these qualities become associated with the entirety of their respective order to the point of being synonymous: the ferocious Viking, the honor bound samurai, the chivalric knight, etc. Whether based in truth or merely ascribed to mythical propaganda, the romanticization of warrior castes relays a universal connotation of an elite fighting force that rises above the common combatant to perform feats worthy of praise. This propensity is hardly unique to any single culture and can be observed in virtually every civilization's recollections throughout time. Even today in contemporary America, a certain glamorization of the idealized fighting spirit remains inculcated within society. Perhaps thanks to a fascination with technology and the relatively recent innovation of flight, militaristic hero-worship has contributed to the rise of an aerial warrior persona that embodies a combination of uniquely American traits. Indubitably, the phrase "fighter pilot" invokes a menagerie of assorted, yet persistent, descriptors in the nation's

collective conscious. Remarkably, this consistent perception of the stereotypical fighter pilot

remains relatively homogeneous within the public domain despite the tremendous rarity of the

profession.[1] Rather than first-hand experience, the ubiquitous concept of fighter pilots can

instead be attributed to a much more indirect (and timeless) method of inference: storytelling.

This pervasive consensus no longer depends upon traditional means of transmission and has been

replaced instead by the modern equivalent of storytelling now encapsulated in popular media.

Although no shortage of examples exists in print and on the small screen, the medium most

responsible for overtly developing the fighter pilot exemplar is the motion picture and its

associated industry. This paper will establish how Hollywood influences the fighter pilot hero

archetype by analyzing its development across a sampling of major motion picture productions.[2]

The validity of this persona will then be evaluated against historical accounts to determine if it is

accurate or merely a figment of modern day folklore crafted by the entertainment industry.

Finally, this analysis will culminate with proposals for further research concerning the subject

matter.

Section 2: Constructing a Hero

Before any analysis of archetypes can be discerned, it is important to first understand the

mechanisms which contribute to the manufacture and acceptance of exemplars, a.k.a. heroes, in a

society. The renowned psychiatrist, Carl Jung, supported by psychologists from the University

of Richmond, hypothesized that the development of heroes is an innate means for the

unconscious human mind to accomplish a number of intrinsic tasks. From a societal perspective,

establishing heroes fulfills a requirement to validate morals, resolve dilemmas, and deliver

justice. On an individual level heroes provide comfort in the face of worry, inspiration to overcome challenges, and resiliency in times of distress. Additionally, heroes afford much-needed dramatic entertainment and embody qualities valued within the given society.[3] Sociologists Gray Cavender and Sarah Prior further theorize that, "Heroes exhibit traits that the public admires in real people such as courage and self-abnegation, although the hero exceeds the normal standards of behavior. Heroes are us projected outwardly; their stories are our stories, only better.[4]" These findings illustrate how heroes signify a hallmark of excellence that society hopes to attain which subsequently prompts the development of individuals in pursuit of these aspirations. In other words, exemplars are manufactured instruments that reflect the ideal attributes recognized within a culture. These paragons compel a society to grow by endeavoring to achieve comparable benchmarks of greatness.

Along with clarifying the purpose of heroes, it is equally important to understand the procedure through which they are established. This process is especially important within the motion picture industry as it coincides with the complementary desire to bolster product appeal for profit maximization. In his work, "The Creation of Popular Heroes," sociologist Orrin Klapp notes that the facade of a hero is developed through, "any story, impression, photograph, rumor, or role which can be engineered to emphasize the extraordinary power of the candidate, or his supremacy in any field of endeavor…"[5] Given that the entertainment industry combines a number of these methods into an easily palatable manner it takes little imagination to recognize that popular media plays a significant role in the development of hero personas.[6] In particular, motion pictures constitute a fertile ground for hero-crafting by marrying carefully scripted plots with glamorous entertainers for maximum effect. An impassioned narrative combined with

alluring characters promotes audience immersion into the storyline, which as American Film Institute trustee Janet Murray concedes, is imperative to successful storytelling.[7]

The audience's propensity to identify with characters is reinforced even further when the plot is crafted to embrace a number of the previously discussed intrinsic concerns identified by Jung. Due to the limited quantity of these innate themes, they are frequently reused in fictional hero narratives resulting in a noticeable degree of similarity between completely unrelated stories. This thematic recycling, however, is hardly a creation of the motion picture industry. Rather, hero-crafting is endemic to mankind's instinctive preference for communicating exemplar narratives via systematic patterns. As observed by psychologist and comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, with few deviations nearly every hero story told since the beginning of time follows the same generic format.[8] This repetitive pattern provides a foundation for mankind to interpret fictional accounts and decipher the embedded messages within. Thus, when combined with Jung's intrinsic needs predictable storytelling imbues audiences with a sense of familiarity and facilitates communication through symbolic messaging (e.g., cowboys with white hats are good; knights in dark armor are bad, etc.).[9]

Accordingly, compelling hero figures are constructed through a clever amalgamation of these various factors. Fundamental psychological expectations are woven into a habitually rehearsed sociological formula to produce easily identifiable figures and storylines. An element of escapism is incorporated by juxtaposing the audience's ordinary existence against the extraordinary individuals and situations found in these predictable narratives. Characters are intentionally developed around subconscious motivators to accentuate enviable traits that invoke admiration and offer the audience a means of connection. Over time, multiple repetitions of this constant message coalesce into a prototypical model (or archetype) unconsciously assumed to

intimate a generic framework of preconceived expectations (e.g., damsels are chaste, surfers are free-spirited, etc.)[10] This process illustrates why popular media enjoys a significant capacity for influence within society. Through continuous exposure to fantasized images such as movies, Hollywood is not only able to shape public perception of reality but can also manipulate archetype development and reception.[11] Consequently, the public may come to accept predetermined notions of a persona, such as a ninja, wizard, pirate, or fighter pilot, without having ever encountered one in person.

Section 3: Fighter Pilots on Film

Armed with an understanding of exemplars it is now possible to analyze the motion picture industry's role in the development of the specific fighter pilot archetype. Far from constituting a recent trend, Hollywood's interest in the fighter pilot persona began shortly after the First World War ended. Released in 1927 and winner of the inaugural Academy Award for Best Picture, the movie *Wings* predated "talkies" and captivated audiences across the nation with the daring heroics of aerial combatants.[12] Even without the benefit of verbal dialogue, *Wings* conveyed a number of themes about the fighter pilot exemplar. The success of *Wings* would be followed shortly by films such as *The Dawn Patrol* and *Hell's Angels* which further glamorized the exploits of dashing aviators. These pioneering films established a number of motifs within the movie industry concerning the fighter pilot archetype, many of which remain active today nearly an astonishing eight decades later.

In order to accurately evaluate the archetype characteristics employed in motion pictures it is necessary to first define assumptions and limitations that might otherwise skew observations.

Assumptions include the fact that film media relies heavily upon superficial characteristics such as physical beauty, articulate speech, and securing the most recognizable cast that a budget can support. Consequently, any observation along these lines would reflect more upon the state of industry fashion at the time than actual archetype development. Additionally, as a consequence of the United States military policy restricting combat aviation billets solely to males until 1993, very few portrayals of female fighter pilots exist for the majority of the archetype's history. Therefore, observations regarding sexist influence are unavoidable due more so to government policy than pure industry preference and must be recognized accordingly. Finally, although films about fighter pilots exist in numerous cultures around the globe, the scope of this paper will be limited to depictions portrayed in the American entertainment industry.

To provide data points for analysis, fifteen films were evaluated to determine the qualities attributed by Hollywood to the fighter pilot persona. To minimize bias, films were selected to include a variety of release dates, production studios, and period settings. Films were evaluated to determine consistent character motifs, both implicit and explicit, used to develop fighter pilot profiles. Observations were compiled and evaluated for similarities between films to determine the most prevalent motifs employed. Invariably, six recurrent themes appeared time and again in the motion picture industry's treatment of fighter pilots. The characteristics most often selected to compose the fighter pilot archetype include: youthfulness, resilience, innate ability, issues with figures of authority, confidence/aggressiveness, and a propensity for hard-living (see figure 1). These attributes comprise the Hollywood standard for a fighter pilot exemplar and have remained relatively unaltered since the subject's first appearance on-screen.

To clarify the significance in regards to exemplar construction, it is necessary to explore each of the specific attributes in detail. When possible, direct comparisons to Campbell's

"Monomyth" elements have been made to illustrate the implications of each trait in regards to traditional heroic narrative composition:

Youthfulness: The overwhelming majority of fighter pilot characters in motion pictures are portrayed as youthful individuals, typically less than 30 years old. Coincidentally, this depiction also closely parallels the actual age demographic of pilots in the military where the physical demands of flying high-performance aircraft is often referred to as, "a young man's business." In glaring contrast to reality, the tendency for youthful casting in films is undoubtedly influenced by the industry's desire to capitalize upon the appeal of attractive (and stereotypically virile) stars.

In addition to audience enticement, it is worth noting that this trend also supports Campbell's observations on the role of age in the classical hero's journey schema.[13] Pertinently, youth denotes inexperience and serves as a logical precursor to many of the other attributes observed. While resilience and innate ability are not necessarily indicative of youth, issues with authority, excessive confidence, and a predisposition for overindulgence in matters of gratification are commonly associated with immaturity. Consequently, audiences are more likely to accept (and perhaps even expect) excessive aggression, rebelliousness, and pleasure-seeking from youthful versus older actors portraying fighter pilots. In instances where protagonists are depicted as older, such as in *Fighter Squadron, The Great Santini,* and *Airplane!,* age is consistently used as a plot device, typically to force the protagonist to reflect on whether or not they still, "have what it takes." This dilemma is frequently exacerbated by surrounding the protagonist with a contrasting bevy of stereotypically young cohorts. Conversely, age in films (particularly those featuring fighter pilots) is more commonly used as a means to distinguish the venerable guide of the youthful protagonist. Enlightened by experience, this mentor will

shepherd the hero's journey and prepare him to accept and conquer his inevitable challenge. Classic examples of this dynamic can be seen in films such as *Top Gun, Behind Enemy Lines,* and *Iron Eagle,* where the interaction between generations of aviators insinuates a passing of the torch between worthy champions. Implicit in this exchange is the premise that only the best fighter pilots live long enough to grow old and thus gain the experience necessary to soften the flaws of youth.

Resilience: Along with youth, Hollywood's treatment of fighter pilots inevitably depicts protagonists as imbued with a noteworthy intrinsic hardiness. This fortitude permits characters to accomplish great feats in the face of overwhelming adversity that might humble a lesser individual. As throughout the history of narrative, this hardship often results from the loss of something or someone revered to the character.[14] Whether overcoming the death of a close companion such as in *Top Gun, Behind Enemy Lines,* and *Fighter Squadron,* or the threat of the unimaginable as in *Iron Eagle, Independence Day,* and *Airplane!*, the hero is forced to dig deep inside his own soul for the strength necessary to claim victory. Naturally, no story would survive long if the protagonist simply gave up at the first encounter with misfortune, so resiliency is a necessary component of any compelling tale. However, this tenacious perseverance is often celebrated to extremes in films about fighter pilots as a willingness to die before accepting defeat. This degree of intense devotion supports the broader hero archetype within America and further emphasizes the protagonist's unique value to society.[15] Conversely, characters that lack resilience (e.g., Lieutenant "Cougar" Cortell in *Top Gun*) are quickly excised from the plot suggesting that there is no room for weakness in the realm of heroes.

Innate Ability: Among all the traits attributed to fictionalized fighter pilots, only innate ability is conferred as completely binary. A character either has it or does not; there is no other

variation possible. Youth, confidence, resilience, and even hedonistic preferences may be possessed in some degree by any individual, but natural talent truly delineates the great characters from the ordinary. Innate ability rarely refers to a specific skill set but rather encapsulates an ambiguous capacity that cannot be acquired simply through normal methods. This is a variation on Campbell's prerequisite monomyth concept of "Supernatural Aid" found in every heroic tale. Bestowed by a higher power, this "gift" sets the character in question apart from the competition and permits the hero to achieve extraordinary accomplishments.[16] The protagonist may or may not even be consciously aware of possessing an intangible advantage over others, confusing it instead with luck or instinct such as when the protagonist in *Top Gun* explains away his unlikely success by declaring, "You don't have time to think up there. If you think, you're dead." However, luck is a commonplace excuse and cannot be relied upon to complete the hero's journey to greatness. Consequently, the hero's gift (or innate ability) must be publicly acknowledged as a delineator from the ordinary in order to establish his exceptional nature. Confirmation of this trait may be bestowed overtly by a worthy figure such as in *Top Gun* when school commandant and very first Top Gun trophy winner, Commander Mike "Viper" Metcalf, anoints protagonist Lieutenant Pete "Maverick" Mitchell as "a natural". Alternatively, innate ability may also be inferred through performance and recognition of extraordinary deeds such as in *Independence Day, Iron Eagle,* and *The Green Lantern.* In either case, validation of the protagonist's gift is critical to establishing his heroic identity.

Authority Issues: Whether portrayed via confrontation (e.g., *Fighter Squadron, The Dawn Patrol*), exploit (*The Great Santini, Iron Eagle*)*,* or reputation (*Airplane!, Top Gun*), recalcitrance is a key theme in the development of fighter pilot film heroes. Of all the traits employed to develop the archetype, insubordination presents the greatest danger of widely

disaffecting audiences towards the plight of the protagonist, as it challenges human nature's

instinctual desire for communal harmony. Ironically, rebellion against figures of authority is

also unavoidable in storytelling. As Campbell observes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,

tension is also a necessary component in heroic narratives.[17] This conflict with authority figures

connects the audience to the hero's plight by infusing the quest with meaning. Consequently,

Hollywood takes great measures to avoid generating a negative opinion of protagonists by

sanctifying their disobedient behavior. This is frequently accomplished by depicting

insubordination as a harmless prank (e.g., the unauthorized tower flyby in *Top Gun* or dining

room disturbance in *The Great Santini*) or a selfless deed (e.g., self-sacrifice in *The Flight of the

Intruder* or *The Green Lantern*). This tactic endears the audience by bridging the hero's do-

what-it-takes attitude to some attractive mortal quality: sense of humor, loyalty, courage, etc.

Juxtaposition against a straight-arrow character is typically employed to emphasize the

protagonist's maverick, yet benevolent, nature. Frequently, this comparison is accomplished to

build further rapport with the audience by depicting the hero as underdog in direct competition

with the stringent foil.

  Confidence: Perhaps no other quality is more readily associated with fighter pilots (real

or fictionalized) than an abundance of confidence. Whether translated as cockiness, aggression,

courage, or hyper-competitiveness, this unbridled faith in self-reliance has taken on such

legendary demeanor that it serves as the very foundation of the archetype. Consequently, film

portrayals rarely miss the opportunity to capitalize upon this integral trait in a variety of manners.

As in all heroic tales, the loss and restoration of confidence is frequently used as a contrivance to

complete the protagonist's transformation from mortal to hero. This fulfills the cycle of rebirth

Campbell deems essential to hero crafting and may also rationalize excessive behavior to the

audience.[18] Notably, representations lacking cocksure deportment are immediately recognizable

as an intentionally crafted plot device, such as Ted Striker in *Airplane!* or Lieutenant "Cougar"

Cortell in *Top Gun.* Over-the-top chutzpah is a tool frequently used to caricaturize antagonists

(e.g., Lieutenant Tom "Iceman" Kazansky from *Top Gun*) by emphasizing outrageous behavior,

excessive bravado, and blatant narcissism. Disproportionate aplomb often serves to develop

tension in films by delivering smugly complacent characters into a position of unnecessary risk

(e.g., Captain Stu Hamilton's farewell flight in *Fighter Squadron*). Finally, conceit may be used

as an internal flaw the protagonist must master before assuming the mantle of hero (e.g., Hal

Jordan in *The Green Lantern*). Regardless of the method employed, confidence provides a

convenient tool in film media to build affinity for the protagonist. Assumption of confidence

also serves as a common bond between the other attributes noted. Thus, virtually every movie

about fighter pilots contains some variation of the theme: youthful arrogance born from innate

ability and bolstered by a carpe diem mentality renders the protagonist above the law and

subsequently unstoppable once his mind is set on the goal.

Hard Living: No depiction of fighter pilots would be complete without due deference

paid to hedonistic pursuits, a theme that has been associated with the archetype since its earliest

portrayals. Encompassed in this category are vices such as incessant smoking, excessive alcohol

consumption and hyper-sexuality. These habits are often employed to accentuate a character's

masculinity while simultaneously suggesting a subtle fatalism inherent in the nature of fighter

pilots. The film industry weaves a melancholy "live for the moment" sentiment by emphasizing

these indulgences. In particular, the preference for meaningless relationships as a coping

mechanism invariably alludes to the archetype's reluctant acceptance of the unforgiving nature

of air combat. However, because of its potentially divisive nature, careful measures are typically

taken to differentiate the degree of excess pursued between protagonists and other characters to avoid debasing the central figure's heroic image. Consequently, any negative emphasis on vices is almost always a plot device used to suggest an inner-turmoil that the protagonist must either conquer along his journey as part of the rebirth motif, such as in *Airplane!*, or succumb to in tragedy as in *The Great Santini*.

Clearly, the motion picture industry has devoted ample resources over the course of decades to establishing a specific fighter pilot persona. By combining the superficial appeals of the entertainment industry with the time-tested formula for heroic narratives described by Joseph Campbell, Hollywood has deified the exemplar into a modern day warrior hero. Simultaneously, copious repetition of the same traits throughout the subject's cinema history has solidified the archetype into the public's subconscious. Some combination of youthfulness, resilience, innate ability, rebellious nature, confidence, and hard living is included in nearly every movie germane to the topic. Consequently, a consistent mental model of fighter pilots prevails across America with little, if any, fluctuation. In the rare instances when portrayals do not mirror expectations it signifies an ulterior motivation. This absence of archetypal qualities is invariably committed intentionally to develop the plot or emphasize the unique nature of a specific character (e.g., Lieutenant Harry Brubaker in *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*) to establish his peculiarity.

Section 4: The Right Stuff

With the fighter pilot exemplar defined, it begs a number of questions starting with, "so what?" Is there any significance to the composition of this manufactured hero or is it merely coincidence? Despite the fictional basis of Hollywood's archetype, some veracity to its utility in real life can be found through an examination of actual fighter pilots. The U.S. military has

commissioned numerous studies throughout the years to determine just what attributes are required to become a successful fighter pilot. A quick check of Air Force historical records will reveal the topic of fighter pilot characteristics to be a perennial favorite amongst Air University student papers as well as Air Force Materiel Command studies, having generated multiple research efforts each decade since the 1960s. These projects, completed for a variety of reasons, typically pertain to some sort of efficiency initiative such as combat efficacy or cost-saving measures. A common theme throughout each inquiry is the search for a relationship between subjective qualities (i.e., personality traits) and objective goals (e.g., assessing pilot inventory or retention) that can be used to determine if "The Right Stuff" actually exists. Invariably, these studies rely heavily upon the existing perception of common fighter pilot attributes as a starting point for investigation before diverging into a variety of findings.[19]

Regardless of impetus, the military's persistent attempts at defining core traits is tacit recognition that certain characteristics play a role in developing capable fighter pilots. This acknowledgment lends credence to the archetype's already iconic nature and suggests that perhaps it does require something special to join this conspicuous group of individuals. Surprisingly, report findings supported just such an indication as many of the official attributes ascribed to ideal fighter pilots candidates bore an uncanny resemblance to the fictional Hollywood model.[20] Additionally, many of the similarities between the essential traits of fictionalized Hollywood pilots and those supported in scientific studies are corroborated by the accounts and first hand observations of actual battle-tested fighter pilots.

According to military historian Mark K. Wells, the importance of the human element in air combat effectiveness was recognized early on during World War II. The United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) speculated intelligence, skill, willpower and endurance to be critical

strengths necessary to compensate for the danger, uncertainty, and physical demands of air combat.[21] The recognition that combat in fighter aircraft required distinct attributes led to a desire to discern the ideal candidate for the job. An official study launched in the hopes of identifying pilot selection criteria found that the ideal fighter pilot was, "a young, aggressive, and very fit aviator, capable of quick and decisive actions." Additional favorable attributes included a very high motivation for combat, spirit of youthful adventure, and devil-may-care attitude with an optimal age of twenty-two.[22] Clearly, this description closely resembles the archetype developed by Hollywood. Notably, neither the report's findings nor the experiences of World War II were responsible for the archetype's impetus, which was nearly two decades old at this time already. Within a few short years, however, the fighter pilot persona would resurface to imprint its unique nature upon the military and American consciousness.

Less than a decade later, the United States found itself once again embroiled in conflict with the outbreak of the Korean War. However, there would be marked differences from World War II that would prove critical to the rise of the fighter pilot persona. Unlike in the previous conflict, the men who flew in Korea found themselves in the unenviable position of fighting a proxy war for a larger conflict. Consequently, the full attention of the U.S. military was never devoted to the Korean peninsula. This fact, combined with the even more distracted efforts of a fledgling U.S. Air Force that was primarily focused on strategic airpower, created the environment necessary for the fighter pilot persona to grow beyond broad generalizations and establish itself as a veritable organizational lifestyle all its own. During this period, notes historian John Sherwood, the cult of the fighter pilot coalesced into a distinct phenomenon celebrating the men that possessed the "indispensable ingredients" of warrior instinct in the skies above Korea. This rambunctious group, heavily influenced by World War II veterans,

wholeheartedly embraced the attributes valued in the previous conflict's fighter pilot population, further reinforcing the distinct sub-culture burgeoning within the flying community. This "flight suit attitude", as Sherwood described it, entailed "a sense of self-confidence and pride that verged on arrogance" and "placed a premium on cockiness and informality."[23] Naturally, this rebellious merit-based culture appealed to the large number of youthful combat aviators entering the war, many of which also enjoyed a penchant for hard liquor and fast women.[24] As in earlier conflicts, these pioneering fighter pilots even dealt with the ever present notion of death in a manner befitting a Hollywood drama by hosting shoot down parties complete with song and drink. This suggests that coping mechanisms existed in a variety of forms, many of which remained little changed from the earliest days of combat aviation.

Certainly, not all fighter pilots of the Korean War era fell into these generalizations but historical accounts rarely bother to capture the habits of the mundane. By the end of the conflict in Korea, the decidedly atypical temperaments sought after in the fighter units of previous wars had fomented into an officially (although somewhat begrudgingly) accepted culture that mirrored the fictional notion of fighter pilots espoused by popular media. The U.S. military fueled this public fascination by popularizing the exploits of individuals who distinguished themselves in aerial combat. Aces, such as Captain James Jabara, were celebrated in popular publications and paraded about on officially sponsored media campaigns aimed at bolstering public support with war heroes.[25] Undoubtedly, this celebrity treatment only added further incentive to the already significant appeal of the career field.

The glamorization of fighter pilots in the Korean War would prove to have long lasting effects within the U.S. Air Force. Even today, many of the traditions and values noted in Sherwood's study remain present in fighter squadrons on the Korean peninsula and continue to

shape the culture accordingly. Although the Korean War ended in a stalemate, it was during this period that the fighter pilot archetype officially established itself as a military icon and gained hero status within the American public's mind. This imprinting would prove fortuitous during the years following the Korean War as a whole new generation of men grew up in preparation for America's next conflict.

If the Korean War represented the zenith of aerial combat for fighter pilots, the conflict in Vietnam could be considered the nadir. Endless reasons captured in countless sources document the variety of ills associated with the war and are beyond the scope of this paper. However, despite the lapse in time, changes in technology, and the generally negative attitude about the conflict, accounts show that the qualities of the fighter pilot archetype remained unchanged. On the contrary, the war in Vietnam only served to solidify the similarities between the persona imprinted during the Korean War and the fictionalized Hollywood model. As before, a familiar breed of men emerged for combat with the desire to not only survive, but to be recognized as the best. In short order these individuals re-established the previous paradigm of cocky, young, fighter pilots saddled with a disdain for authority figures lacking in credibility. As in conflicts before, the strains of combat, death, and separation led to reliance upon a variety of coping mechanisms, to include alcohol and womanizing.   In short, the Vietnam War reaffirmed the qualities of the fighter pilot archetype already ingrained into the military. As legendary fighter pilot Robin Olds summed it up, "Fighter pilot is not just a description, it's an attitude; it's cockiness, it's aggressiveness, it's self-confidence. It is a streak of rebelliousness and competitiveness. But there's something else; there's a spark. There's a desire to be good, to do well in the eyes of your peers and your commander, and in your own mind, to be second to no one. The sky is your playground and competitiveness is your life."[26]

Section 5: So What?!? (Summary and Conclusions)

The intent of this paper was to determine how Hollywood's influence affected the development of a fighter pilot hero archetype in American society. This model would then be evaluated against historical accounts to determine if any merit existed between the actual and fictionalized personas. To establish a basis for the significance of this study, a prerequisite exploration of the traditional methodology employed in subconscious hero-crafting was examined with particular attention placed upon identifying factors that support archetype imprinting. By establishing how these embedding mechanisms operate, an inference could be made in regards to the entertainment industry's capacity for shaping cultural norms.

With a foundation in place explaining how hero figures are created and why they are important to society, an analysis was performed on the specific character treatment of fighter pilots in a variety of motion pictures. Observations were drawn from fifteen motion pictures featuring fighter pilot protagonists mitigating a number of variables such as era, studio, casting, etc. These data points were compiled to present the generic representation of fighter pilots conveyed to the American public by the motion picture industry. This fictitious model was then compared against portrayals of fighter pilots from a variety of historical accounts representing several wars to determine archetype origin and validity.

Like many of the best mysteries in life, the question, "did Hollywood or the military create the fighter pilot persona?" can be answered with, "it depends." There can be little doubt that the archetype developed in motion pictures influenced the public perception of fighter pilots. The fictional portrayal's arrival on screen predated the majority of the conflicts supposedly responsible for creating the military myth. Therefore, Hollywood may claim at least partial

credit for the persona's evolution over time. Certainly, the entertainment industry is responsible for reinforcing the prevailing familiarity of the fighter pilot exemplar (whether real or fictional) through its exploitation of the subtle patterns of communication predisposed to humans. Traits attributed to the archetype coincide with familiar elements found in the universal model common to all heroic narratives. They forge a connection between the audience and characters by establishing parallels using easily recognizable motifs that appeal to intrinsic expectations and facilitate the transmission of underlying messages. Thus, as a consequence of man's subconscious desire for heroes and long-standing fascination with war, the entertainment industry was able to capitalize on the enigmatic figure that appeared shortly after the advent of aviation in order to create a new breed of hero for public consumption. Clearly, this archetype has been well-received and is here to stay. Nearing a century since its inception, the "sky-warrior" exemplar remains enshrined in the Hollywood repertoire and has ensured its continued longevity by embracing another of man's obsessions, the future, in works such as *Star Wars, The Last Starfighter, Battlestar Galactica,* and *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century.*

However, credit for the fighter pilot archetype is not due entirely to Hollywood. The fictitious hero figure in popular media also happens to be a direct representation of the attributes consistently cherished in actual fighter pilots. Military studies, recollections, and firsthand accounts all verify that the qualities invoked in the mind's eye for fighter pilots all have utility in the fast-paced arena of aerial combat. In all likelihood, many of the individuals influenced by Hollywood's glamorization of the persona had a reciprocal influence upon the development of the film exemplar. Despite the potentially negative connotations, the official record shows that youth, skill, confidence, rebelliousness, a high degree of resilience, and a certain zest for life are endemic to fighter pilots as much in real life as on film. These traits fuel the drive necessary to

survive in a combat environment, cope with its stresses, and thrive as well. From an organizational perspective, the combination of these traits represents an acceptable composition for individuals that must ultimately rely upon their own capabilities when routinely placed into life-threatening situations. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the profession combined with the lethal consequences of being anything other than the best results in a constant culling of less-qualified individuals. This produces a cyclical phenomenon within the subculture that requires new applicants to quickly identify role model paragons and emulate their abilities in order to survive. Much like the subtle implications in film, only the best live long enough to grow old, and only then until someone better eventually comes along.

Section 6: What's The Vector, Victor? (Further Research Proposals)

The final objective of this paper was to determine areas worthy of further research concerning the subject matter. Although the opportunities are limitless, suggestions will be limited to topics that may directly affect the military. Proposals include:

1- How does public perception of fighter pilots affect military recruiting, development, and retention? As the all-volunteer force continues to shrink while military commitments continue to rise, what factors will be required to motivate individuals to become fighter pilots? Will the gradual shift in public attitude towards conflict affect support for the military in general and combat aviation in particular? What, if any, positive influence results from fictional portrayals of fighter pilots and does this justify increased cooperation between the U.S. military and Hollywood?

2- Is the public fascination with military aviation and fighter pilots a relic of a bygone era? With the advent of unmanned technology, will the fighter pilot persona remain intact, evolve to a new paradigm, or become extinct altogether? Can this evolution be co-opted to inspire a continued fascination with technology in order to capture public support for the military?

3- The fraternal bond between military members is a traditional theme within fictional narratives, especially in motion pictures. Even satirical spoofs such as *Hotshots* and *Airplane!* use the same character models which suggest a tongue-in-cheek admission of archetype abuse by Hollywood. However, if the fictional portrayal accurately represents the actual military consensus of a fighter pilot, how will the advent of automated combat systems affect military aviation? Will the seemingly cutthroat competitive environment that produces top-notch pilots transition to unmanned platform operators or will this fighting spirit die out? What happens to the desire to be the best when the operator is no longer exposed to danger and how will this affect military competency, especially when combating a well-equipped peer competitor?

Endnotes

[1] According to the United States government (http://www.census.gov/popclock), American population at the beginning of November, 2013, exceeded 317 million individuals. Comparatively, at the same time the military branch with the largest pool of candidates, the U.S. Air Force, employed less than 3,700 fighter pilots with a capacity to produce only 350 more annually (per AFPC CAF assignments briefing on 4 Dec 13).

[2] Although the motion picture enterprise is not confined to a single location, the term Hollywood will be used to signify the collective industry throughout this paper.

[3] Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, "10 Reasons Why We Need Heroes," *University of Richmond Blog*, 17 May 2013, http://blog.richmond.edu/heroes/2013/05/17/10-reasons-why-we-need-heroes/ (accessed 14 Nov 13).

[4] Gray Cavender and Sarah Prior, "Constructing the Military Hero," *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 2, (2013): 470. http://dx.doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2013.02.42 (accessed 15 Nov 13)

[5] Orrin E. Klapp, "The Creation of Popular Heroes," *American Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 2 (Sep 1948): 136, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2771362 (accessed 12 Nov 13).

[6] Sophon Shadraconis, "Leaders and Heroes: Modern Day Archetypes," *Lux: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University* vol 3., no. 1 (13 Nov 13): 4. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1048&context=lux (accessed 27 Nov 13).

[7] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 110.

[8] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 227.

[9] Klapp, "Popular Heroes," 138.

[10] Shadraconis, "Leaders and Heroes", 2.

[11] Ibid., 4.

[12] American Film Institute Catalog of Feature Films, *Wings,* AFI online, http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=1&Movie=13362 (accessed 12 Nov 13).

[13] Campbell, *Hero,* 294-296.

[14] Ibid., xlvi.

[15] Orrin E. Klapp, "Hero Worship in America," *American Sociological Review* 14, no. 1 (Feb 1949): 61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2086446 (accessed 18 Nov 13).

[16] Campbell, *Hero,* 66.

[17] Ibid., 125-126.

[18] Ibid., 220.

[19] Examples include: Maj DeWan D. Madden, "Tactical Fighter Pilot Selection Considerations," Research Report no. M-U 35582-7 M1791t (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Command And Staff College, 1973); Katie M. Ragan, *The Warfighters of Today: Personality and Cognitive Characteristics of Rated Fighter Pilots in the United States Air Force,* Doctoral Dissertation, paper 2187 (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, 2009) http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/etd/2187; Paul D. Retzlaff, Raymond E. King, Suzane E. McGlohn, and Joseph D. Callister, *The Development of the Armstrong Laboratory Aviation Personality Survey (ALAPS),* Aerospace Medicine Directorate Paper AL/AO-TR-1996-0108 (Brooks AFB, TX: Air Force Materiel Command, 1996).

[20] Katie Ragan, *The Warfighters of Today: Personality and Cognitive Characteristics of Rated Fighter Pilots in the United States Air Force,* Doctoral Dissertation, paper 2187 (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, 2009), 30-39. http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/etd/2187 (accessed 18 Nov 13)

[21] Mark K. Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 47.

[22] Quoted in Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare*, 47.

[23] John Darrell Sherwood, *Officers in Flight Suits, 6.*

[24] Ibid., 127-136.

[25] William B. Allmon, "Captain James Jabara: Ace of the Korean War," *Aviation History Magazine,* 14 Nov 2006, republished online via Historynet.com, http://www.historynet.com/captain-james-jabara-ace-of-the-korean-war.htm (accessed 20 Nov 2013)

[26] Robin Olds, *Fighter Pilot: The Memoirs of Legendary Ace ROBIN OLDS* comp. Christina Olds and Ed Rasimus (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 291.

Film Title	Release Year	Production Studio	Prevalent Characteristics Observed						
			Youthfulness	Resilience	Innate Ability	Authority Issues	Confidence / Courage	Hard Living	
The Dawn Patrol	1938	Warner Bros.	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Fighter Squadron	1948	Warner Bros.	X	X	X	X	X	X	
The Bridges at Toko-Ri	1954	Paramount Picture							note 1
The Great Santini	1979	Orion Pictures		X	X	X	X	X	
Airplane	1980	Paramount Picture			X	X	X	X	
Top Gun	1986	Paramount Picture	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Iron Eagle	1986	TriStar Pictures	X	X	X	X	X		
Hot Shots	1991	Twentieth Century Fox	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Flight of the Intruder	1991	Paramount Picture	X			X	X	X	
Independence Day	1996	Twentieth Century Fox	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Behind Enemy Lines	2001	Twentieth Century Fox	X	X		X	X		note 2
Pearl Harbor	2001	Touchstone Pictures	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Stealth	2005	Columbia Pictures	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Flyboys	2006	Twentieth Century Fox	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Green Lantern	2011	Warner Bros.	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Note 1: Intentional portrayal of an atypical fighter used as a plot device

Note 2: Protagonist is technically a Radar Intercept Officer (RIO)

Figure 1. Fighter Pilot Movies

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